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April 14, 1952

To : The Minister
From : Edmund A. Gullion
Reference : NIE-35/1, "Probable Developments in Indochina through Mid-1952".

Legation Telegram 1948, April 5.

GENERAL

My comments about National Intelligence Estimate 35/1 are not, I believe, fully reflected in Legtel 1948 of April 5th although I do not entirely disagree with the latter. While I would not have phrased Conclusion No. 6 of the intelligence paper as it occurs in the text, I do not find the General Estimate over-pessimistic.

I would phrase Conclusion No. 6 as follows:

"Through mid-1952 the pattern in Indochina will be essentially one of continued fighting and continued stalemate during which the Viet Minh will continue to hold its advantage with respect to the France-Vietnamese forces. On balance the Viet Minh will retain the strategic initiative in Indochina and by June 1952 will probably still be implanted within the defenses of the Red River Delta in greater strength than at the beginning of the year. The principal French effort will be devoted to clearing this region at the expense of other operations. No decision will have been gained by either side."

(For discussion, please see II (b) infra).

I.

My main point is that I do not believe that the Legation has enough information to support this estimate, nor does the intelligence made available to us by other agencies and exhibited at the Singapore Conference seem sufficient for such vitally important forecast.

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a. As the Indochina war has increasingly assumed the character of a struggle between the communists and the free world, its timetable and its eventual outcome increasingly depend not so much upon local decisions and campaigns as upon the intentions and capabilities of Moscow, Peiping, Washington, and Paris. I believe that chances for an internal political solution are now less than they were and that this war will only be settled when there is some change in the line-up of the cold war. Our estimate as to what will happen here is, therefore, only as good as our global intelligence about Sino-Soviet intentions and potential.

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b. In the local arena [REDACTED] Chinese intentions is less than it should be. This has been especially true since the French lost that contact with the Chinese frontier which possession of the border posts on RC 4 secured to them; since the recent tightening of controls on the Chinese side; and since the clamping of security restrictions upon southern China. I believe we in the Legation agree that French fear of "provoking" the Chinese has somewhat inhibited their collection of intelligence.

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c. Doubtless Washington is also considering and collating intelligence received from other posts on the periphery of China and elsewhere. (This Legation has recommended that there be a central Joint and Allied Intelligence Center located in Hong Kong or Manila to process Chi intelligence - from all points on the periphery of China). Unless the information Washington sees has more substance than ours, I do not think we have a good enough notion of what the Chinese are doing and can do to prolong the struggle short of overt interference. It seems to me that, if they wish, the Kremlin and Peiping can bring about here a more serious situation for the free world than exists in Korea with much less risk and effort and without intervening openly. (For example, a matter of only 200 anti-aircraft and AT guns in Viet Minh hands might make a decisive difference).

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d. Another omission in our intelligence picture, which really should be within our power to rectify, is the lack of adequate and timely information on the balance and the potential of forces in Indochina itself. We have not got a good picture of the Vietnam Army compared to the Viet Minh Army:

(1) We do not know how many men the Viet Minh have under training;

(2) We do not know the rate of formation of Viet Minh units up to divisions as compared to the rate of formation of the loyal Vietnamese Army;

(3) We do not definitely know what finances will be available from American, French and Vietnamese sources to equip local loyal units;

(4) We do not yet know the budgets of the Associated States armies;

(5) We do not know, or at least we are not told in any timely fashion, the rate of the increase of men under arms in the Vietnamese forces; or to what extent the new increments to the Army represent additional strength or merely transfers from the supplétifs or from colonial elements of the French Army;

(6) We do not know surely the rate at which non-commissioned and officer cadres are or can be furnished to the Vietnamese Army (the picture is obscured by the faulty workings of the mobilization scheme, the difficulties and absenteeism in the officers schools, and the changes of plan with respect to use of French cadres);

(7) We do not know to what extent the mobilization plan is to be used in the creation of the Army or its reserves (only in the last week the French told us in answer to our question that the plan has been partially dismantled and that the 14th increment of conscripts will not be called up);

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(8) We are not able to follow closely the proceedings of the Joint Permanent Franco-Vietnamese Military Committee;

(9) Finally, and most serious of all, we have no very good idea of the combat potential and performance of the units of the Vietnamese Army. Literally everything now, it seems to me, depends upon this Army.

Not all of the answers to the above questions would affect the estimate in reference which has only a few months to run. On the other hand only by closer observation to these details can we size up the AS armies as they confront their opponents.

Their creation was known to be a risk but so far as our knowledge is concerned it can hardly be a calculated risk unless we obtain from the French (because they alone have the information) detailed periodic, battalion by battalion, and commander by commander, evaluations of performance of the Vietnamese units which have been constituted, in the line or in reserve.

(10) In sum, I fear that we do not know enough about Chinese intentions, the Viet Minh army, or even the Vietnamese Army, to make the serious estimate the situation requires. The French and Vietnamese must give us more such intelligence systematically without our having to dig for it.

II.

a. Subject to the reservations above, I think the paper is a credible and generally valid piece of deductive reasoning. It was produced after Hoa Binh and probably in an atmosphere of disappointment. The drafters may not yet have realized the uses to which the 20,000 men evacuated from Hoa Binh could be put in clearing the delta.

b. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the onset of the rainy season during mid-1952 may well find:

(1) The delta more heavily infiltrated than at the beginning of the year;

(2) Relative strength of the forces in opposition largely unchanged;

(3) The French still hemmed in their perimeter defenses after the rebuff of their first effort in several years of campaigning to assume the offensive;

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(4) A considerable amount of fatigue and attrition on both sides which we are unable to assess definitively;

(5) A decline in French home morale which will have its effect here;

(6) Lack of progress on the political front with resulting disillusionment;

(7) "Third Force" elements still in being and new ones in formation which did not exist at the beginning of the period under review.

Since I believe that failure to make progress on the military and political fronts has a reciprocal effect, I think that the continuance of stalemate must be actually accounted as "gradual deterioration of the situation". In this sense I agree with NIE-35/1, although I would have worded Conclusion 6 differently.

III.

Some notes:

a. While it is true that misgivings about French ability and will to continue the fight disturb some quarters, it is also paradoxically true that many more Vietnamese are disturbed by the thought that the French will remain and on the terms of the March 8 Agreements. The vicious circle here is composed of these elements: the controls which the French think necessary to guard their lines of communication and sustain home morale while they drive for a military conclusion, also operate to alienate or discourage Vietnamese support, thus causing the French to maintain their controls. France seems bound to continue here only on terms which make it difficult for her to succeed.

b. Although Conclusion 7 points out that France may eventually have to withdraw from Indochina, I think that Paragraph 16 of the Discussion summarizes very well the factors which "hold the French to their present commitments."

c. The paper in reference estimates the presence of 15,000 Chinese Communists in Indochina. We have heard estimates running all the way from 2,000 to 30,000.

Bao Dai once told a legation officer categorically that there were 30,000 Chinese

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d. The paper correctly takes account of the potential of the "third force" anti-communist, anti-French movements. Since it was written, the Son Ngoc Thanh dissidence has been added to that of Trinh Minh The. Operations against the latter damaged but failed to eliminate him. In addition to the military problem, these hold-outs exercise gravitational pull on the local Associated States Governments, some members of which sympathize secretly with them and are influenced in their policies by them.

e. I concur with the views of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2 Intelligence, with respect to Chinese intentions as described in footnotes to Paragraph 23 (a) and Paragraph 4 of the "Conclusions".

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f. Paragraph 24 of "Discussions" describes the additional logistical support which the Sino-Soviets may supply.

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indicate that anti-aircraft, artillery and ammunition are arriving; and just beyond the period of the estimate there looms the spectre, if not of CCAF intervention, at least of the appearance of a pseudo-Viet Minh Air Force possible based on seized land at Hainan or on as yet unprepared fields in Vietnam itself.

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